THE THIRTIETH MAN

BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

JUNE 18, 1911

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THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Reprinted from THE CITY COLLEGE QUARTERLY

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Reprinted from THE CITY COLLEGE QUARTERLY, Vol. 7, No. 3, October, 1911.

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Young Men of the Class of June, 1911:—

In this ceremony, anticipating your crowning with baccalaureate degrees, I feel as if I were performing the office of the ancient prophet who walked one day many centuries ago out over the Judæan hills to anoint a young man who should some day be king. You will remember, perhaps, that all the sons of the patriarch from whose family the king was to be selected were made to pass before the prophet (though he was disposed to take the very first because of his stature and countenance) and that it was not till the youngest, out in the fields herding the sheep, was sent for that the son of royal destiny was identified and anointed against the day of his crowning and the years of his ruling. To-day I see you each on this New World hill as the prophet finally saw the predestined king on that far hillside of the Old World.

It was the figure of that same young man about to be king, let me remind you, that Michael Angelo saw one day in a block of marble in an Italian valley—and evoked into an immortality comparable with that of the Psalms of this shepherd king which will be preserved and repeated probably as long as there is human speech.

And it was the spirit of this same young man which Browning caught hundreds of years after Michael Angelo into these lines of our own tongue:

"What stops my despair
This: 'tis not what man does that exalts him, but what man would do!
See the king—I would help him
Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to enrich,
To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would, knowing which
I know that my service is perfect."

What a kingship meant in those days is intimated by the first fable of scriptural record, of a few generations before the

time of David—the fable of the trees who assembled to choose a king. They nominated first the olive tree, but he declined saying, "Why should I leave my fatness," and "go up and down for the other trees." And likewise answered the fig and the vine saying: Should we leave our sweetness and good fruit and good cheer "to go up and down for the other trees?" So the other trees finally chose the bramble or thistle, and put their trust in his shadow, till the fire came out of the bramble and consumed them. The kingship as defined in this fable, though it was perverted, meant a going up and down for the people, and it is of such a kingship that I wish to say a few words to you—for it seems to me that the training and anointing of you young men for such service is one of the peculiar offices of this College.

I have estimated that in thickly settled communities one person in about every thirty adults is a public servant, that is, is going up and down in some vicarious capacity for the other twenty-nine. The ratio is higher or lower according to the degree of socialized life in a community but I shall arbitrarily take this ratio and call the public servant the thirtieth man.

This "thirtieth man" sweeps the streets of the city. He is pontifex of the country roads. He lights the lamps when the natural lights of heaven go out, and extinguishes the fires of the earth. With one hand he gathers our letters of affection and business and with the other distributes them in the remotest cabins on the mountains. He weighs the wind, reads the portents of the clouds, gives augur of the heat and cold. He makes wells in the valleys, he fills the pools with water. He tastes the milk before the city child may drink it; he tests and labels the food in the stores and shops; he corrects false balances and short measures. He keeps watch over forest and stream; gives warning of rocks and shoals to men at sea and of plague and poison to those on land. He is warden of fish and bird and wild beast; he is host to the homeless and shelterless; he is guardian and nurse to the child who comes friendless into the world and chaplain at the burial of the man who goes friendless out of it. He is assessor and collector of taxes

—treasurer and comptroller; he is the teacher of seventeen million children, youth, men and women; he is public librarian and maker of books; overseer of the poor and supervisor; superintendent, doctor, nurse and guard in hospital, prison and almshouse; coroner and keeper of the potter's field. He is mayor, judge, public prosecutor and sheriff (who may summon all the other twenty-nine as his *posse comitatus*). He is a soldier in the army and a sailor in the navy, general and admiral, legislator, justice, member of the cabinet, Governor and President.

In addition to this he is member of numberless public commissions and boards, paid and unpaid, industrial, educational, scientific, philanthropic, administrative, with functions ranging all the way from the inspection of terrapin in one state and scythe stones in another state, to the regency of schools in most of the states.

So it has come about that whereas once in a primitive anarchic state every man was for himself, now one man in every thirty is protecting, inspecting, instructing or nursing the other twenty-nine and their children. And the size of the section is growing smaller and the number of sections greater; for every year sees many new boards or commissions created. In one year, I noticed some time ago one hundred and four new boards and commissions had been voted in the various states. Once society got on with its thousandth man or its hundredth man, then its fiftieth; but even now the ratio of one in thirty may be too small for this community at least.

This catalogue and this ratio of vicariousness intimate the enormity and variety of the public service. The mere names of the thirtieth men (some of whom are women) and their offices in New York fill a volume of nearly six hundred pages of the size of the *City Record*.

To many readers of this volume it gives no suggestion of else than the size and expense of our civil list, of high potential political patronage and of low actual efficiency. But I am thinking that if one who saw the real significance of this list could express it, he would find more vital, human and

poetic material here than Homer found for his epic of the siege of ancient Troy. For this standing army of nearly a hundred thousand (82,000 names are on the pay-roll of the city I am informed by the Bureau of Municipal Research) is engaged in a daily fight against the enemies of this city, invisible for the most part, that never lift their siege day nor night. I have thought that Walt Whitman might have made a heroic poem of great power if he had but written in his rugged rhythm the titles of the officers and soldiers in this great army of peace: of men fighting fires in the forests or the tenements; of men fighting bacteria in the air, earth and water; of men and women fighting ignorance and laziness and passion in the thousands of public school rooms; of men fighting uncleanness and uncleanliness and corruption and waste with broom and statistic and lens and meter and honest and expert eyes.

I remember reading once the definition of a signal box. It was defined, not as a box made of certain material, of certain dimensions, and of certain equipment, but as a place "where men, in an agony of vigilance, light blood-red and sea-green fires to keep other men from death,"—"a house of life and death." And a definition of a post-box, a most unpoetical name as one sees it written in reports and a most inartistic object as one sees it attached to a street lamp. It was defined, however, not as a box of certain price, color, size and metal, but as a "sanctuary of human words."

And if someone of like insight could make the definitions of other everyday realities about us, democracy might appear the glorious thing which in its intending it really is; for as the poet who made this definition of the signal box and the post-box has said "Democracy is always dreaming of a nation of kings"; kings in the sense of men who are monarchs of themselves at least, clear visioned, strong willed, clean virtued, sovereigns. It is of that dreaming, of that longing, as I said to your brother Sons of the City two years ago, that you have been educated.

But in another sense the "kings" of democracy are these

"thirtieth men," anointed, appointed, not by some far-seeing prophet, living apart from the people, but selected of the hurried and often fickle desires of men in the midst of the struggle for existence. The gathering of votes for such kings in rough boxes in tailor shops or barber shops or like places, does not impress one with the importance and sacredness of the franchise. And yet the timid journey of Samuel to a village in Judæa to annoint a son of Jesse to the kingship, was not a more significant pilgrimage than is that of a mechanic, merchant or lawyer who goes into the next block to cast his vote for the thirtieth man, in a republic.

For despite all the frustration of selfishness and dishonesty and venality; despite all the proneness of the average voter (as of even the king-making prophet of old) to look upon the "outward appearance" and to take the man who puts himself forward first; despite all the reluctance of the prosperous olive and the eagerness of the demagogic bramble (or thistle) to "go up and down for the people," there is sublimer import in a democracy's elections than in a theocratic appointment, for these elections represent an aspiration of human intelligence and not a mere dictation of destiny, however superior.

Did any king of ancient or even modern time, for example, have a higher commission than that which one generation gives to a teacher in its public school, college or university, to prepare its children for a better, happier, nobler living in the next generation? Can you imagine a king anointed to a holier service than that to which a nurse is set apart of public sympathy and utter unselfishness? Even the cleaner in the street is the tangible expression of a motive of far higher human beneficence than the appearance of angels of deliverance or of warning in the paths of individuals of the ancient and mediæval times.

I take an illustration even more intimate. Every morning in this College a report is received of the cases of contagious disease in the City and every day one of our staff examines the list of homes of our students to discover if any one is menaced by these cases. The king whom the ancient prophet

anointed imagined guardian angels that should keep men from dashing their feet against stones or from being poisoned by adders or from dying of pestilence that walked in darkness or from wasting at noonday of destruction. Here has the city man made real those angels, in so matter-of-fact a way that they appear only as white-habited street-cleaners and nurses and bacteriologists and medical and laboratory assistants.

A young man of letters, of distinguished literary lineage, returned from abroad, said to me that New York seemed to him "barbaric and intensely selfish." But I replied that if he would but let me take him to certain places he would know that he was mistaken. One does not excuse the barbarisms and selfishnesses, which are everyday advertised, in saying that no great city has, as a city, intended more loftily, more unselfishly in its heart, as this College itself witnesses. One needs to read this city record with insight to know with what high and unselfish purpose this city is sacrificing today and praying for a better to-morrow.

When journeying through a pass in the Jura mountains in France last March, I saw silhouetted against the cold evening sky the figures of soldiers climbing along a ridge to their fortress at the end of the day's march or scouting. In Florence I saw troop after troop crossing and recrossing the Arno to and from that hill of San Miniato where the replica of Michael Angelo's David stands looking over the city and across to the snowy Apennines. At Siena, I was waked in the morning by the tramp of soldiers' feet. In the place of the Cæsars I saw multitudes held in by lines of soldiers, while two kings, one of the South, and the other of the North passed. Everywhere were soldiers. And always was rising the thought, 'if only these men, compelled to this military service—useless perhaps except in its disciplines—could be trained and employed against the real foes of a people, of a nation, and a city, what a power would be released for the general good—one-tenth of the active years of every man.

And what if those forces could be added to the strength of our thirtieth man in this city, in this republic!

But if one may not expect to see this in our generation, one may yet cherish this hope that you who have had the dearest and best training that this city has to give, will be readiest to serve her, not as those who seek office for their livelihood or for honor or for leisure, not as the men of Europe who have to serve in the army (though I have wished that every graduate of this College might be led to serve the City as a West Point man serves the national government, as bacteriologist, chemist, engineer, rodman, statistician, inspector, laborer, teacher, with no thought of his personal advancement) the hope that you will at any rate go even if there is no such office open to you, as the young David who was some day to be king went to minister to the spirit of Saul, who was king before him, willing to starve your own life out to fill up that which the "king" represented—the City that has given some of you birth and all of you re-birth—willing to grow poor or to remain poor yourselves to enrich it, and knowing this to know that your service to this city is perfect.

You will often be disappointed as was David. Your "wishes will fall through" as his. You would help, as he, but cannot. Yet go on daring, O my young kings, anointed of your own puissant ambitions, stopping your despair with the cry of that same young king, "'Tis not what man does that exalts him," but what man, constantly, persistently, undauntedly and intelligently "would do."

If you carry that spirit into your work in the city—or wherever you go—it does not so much matter whether you have an office or not. You will be in the public service. You will be of the kings of whom democracy is dreaming.

JOHN H. FINLEY.